



## Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



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### Asia's China Debate

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# "The Enemy of My Enemy": Pakistan's China Debate

ROBERT G. WIRISING

## Executive Summary

- In current circumstances of U.S. global dominance and shifting strategic alignments in Asia, Pakistani leaders have been compelled to reexamine their four-decades-long alliance with China and to consider the possibility that China, lured by alternative alignments in the course of its progress toward greater global power, may lose interest in Pakistan.
- A long-standing consensus persists among Pakistanis, nevertheless, that the alliance with China is not only indispensable but also more than likely to endure. The consensus is driven by Pakistan's increasing dependence on China's massive and sustained military aid and by the Pakistani conviction that Pakistan and China share major strategic interests.
- The most important strategic interest shared by China and Pakistan is the containment of India.
- Pakistan's principal stakeholders in an enduring China connection are its armed forces and their civilian allies both in the federal bureaucracy and in the country's sprawling defense community.
- These same stakeholders have an equal, or even greater, interest in sustaining Pakistan's present alliance with the United States; but such an alliance is up against formidable obstacles, foremost among them the Pakistanis' deep-seated mistrust of American intentions in South Asia. In the best of all worlds, Pakistanis would choose to have close and enduring relations with *both* China and the United States.
- Whether Pakistanis continue indefinitely to look to China to meet their military and strategic needs will depend, in the end, on momentous strategic decisions yet to be made not only in Islamabad and Beijing but also in Washington and possibly New Delhi.

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For four decades, the Sino-Pakistan strategic alliance has benefited both China and Pakistan. Pakistan was China's only reliable Free World diplomatic partner during the years of China's international isolation; and it remains today, as always, a useful gateway for Chinese penetration of the energy-rich Islamic Middle East. China, for its part, has supplied the Pakistanis with an abundance of relatively inexpensive conventional arms, as well as strategically vital nuclear weapon and ballistic missile know-how. Each party to the alliance has served the other as a muscular counterweight to India and hedge against Indian adventurism.

In an era of U.S. global dominance and shifting strategic alignments in Asia, Pakistanis have been reexamining the pros and cons of continuing alliance with China. Their reassessment has taken account of China's relentless economic march and potential for forcing an eventual redistribution of power in Asia—one that might work in Pakistan's favor—but it has also had to consider the possibility that China, in the course of its progress toward greater global power, might lose interest in Pakistan. Equally, the reassessment has had to reckon with Washington's persistent military and economic primacy, its post-9/11 redefinition of America's national security imperatives, as well as its emerging and very likely competitive relationship with Beijing. Meanwhile, how New Delhi plays its relations with Pakistan, as well as with Beijing and Washington, has also had to be factored into Pakistani calculations.

There is relatively little *public* debate in Pakistan about its alliance with China. This is explained in part by the extreme sensitivity of the issue and the Pakistanis' understandable reticence to publicize any reservations they may have about an alliance that has proven of such inestimable value to them. It is explained in larger part, however, by the long-standing consensus among Pakistanis—of whatever political or ideological leaning—that the alliance is not only indispensable but also more than likely to endure. As they see it, the endurance of the alliance will owe its greatest debt to the probable persistence of a common Sino-Pakistani interest in the containment of India, an interest captured in the old adage: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This interest could well expand in the future. At least implicit in Pakistan's China debate, then, is the possibility that the alliance with China may yet prove even more advantageous to Pakistan than it has been in the past.

## PAKISTAN'S CHINA CONNECTION: POLICY DRIVERS

The 1963 Sino-Pakistan Border Agreement, following quickly upon the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, eliminated whatever grounds for dispute might have developed between China and Pakistan over the ill-defined international boundary that wound its way between them in the lofty peaks of the Karakoram mountain range. Accompanying the Border Agreement, which rewarded Pakistan with more terrain than it could unequivocally claim title to (including the prestige-rich southern face of Mount Godwin Austen, or K-2, the earth's second highest peak), was an accord sanctioning the establishment of commercial air traffic between the two countries. This was China's first such accord and an early sign of the reciprocity that has always underpinned the Sino-Pakistan relationship. It was not long before these understandings blossomed into a multifaceted partnership, which the Chinese describe as an “all-weather friendship.” This

has left a deep Chinese imprint not only upon Pakistan's military forces but upon its strategic planning as well.

### **Military aid**

Among Pakistan's armed forces there are plentiful signs of China's past and future importance to Pakistan as an arms supplier. The supply relationship began in the mid-1960s with China's provision of interest-free loans and relatively inferior but free military hardware. In the 1980s, the relationship shifted to arms production cooperation; Pakistan was asked to pay for the hardware, and the loans carried interest. Cash-strapped Pakistan had to rely increasingly on Chinese arms and forego the superior and more expensive Western arms. As a result, the bulk of the army's striking power today is overwhelmingly of Chinese manufacture. Even Pakistan's still very small navy shows the ever-increasing importance of China's aid. In October 2003, China and Pakistan conducted joint naval exercises—the first ever undertaken by China's navy—off the coast of Shanghai.

Clandestine Chinese supply of sensitive nuclear technologies to Pakistan—allegedly ranging all the way from the supply of weapons-grade uranium, ring magnets, Chinese scientists, and high-tech diagnostic equipment for nuclear weapons testing to the provision of a design for Pakistan's nuclear bombs—has all along been indispensable to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Pakistan's expanding nuclear-capable fleet of short- and medium-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles is also heavily in China's debt. In its latest semi-annual report to Congress on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stated: "Chinese entities continued to work with Pakistan and Iran on ballistic missile-related projects during the first half of 2003. Chinese entity assistance has helped Pakistan move toward domestic serial production of solid-propellant SRBMs and supported Pakistan's development of solid-propellant MRBMs."

Pakistan may even be benefiting from China's rapidly advancing satellite imaging and navigational capabilities. According to an Indian analyst, these capabilities "have serious security implications for India. Not only do they enhance surveillance cover over Indian territorial space, they also provide a greater degree of precision and control to Pakistani missiles, improving their circular error of probability (CEP) substantially."

It would, of course, be a serious error to view Pakistan as the sole or even principal beneficiary of its military relationship with China. As one of the biggest of very few foreign customers for Chinese armaments, Pakistan has been a major source of revenue for China's struggling arms industries. Pakistan has also been an extremely important surreptitious source of superior Western weapons (especially aircraft) technology. It is to be doubted, moreover, whether Pakistan—after decades of formal collaboration with China in co-production of ground and air weaponry—has achieved any greater genuine arms independence than it had when the relationship began.

### **Strategic complementarities**

Apart from the military assistance rendered by China over the decades, Pakistanis attach at least equal weight in their assessments of the China-Pakistan connection to the seeming complementarity or overlap in the two states' *strategic* interests.

This apparent closeness of strategic fit between them, hailed unreservedly in public pronouncements by both sides for many years, has without doubt been unashamedly inflated. In a public speech in Beijing during his early November 2003 visit to China, for instance, Musharraf described the partnership as “deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains”—mirroring the rhapsodic language that both he and the Chinese had employed during earlier official visits. There is, it is usually claimed, “total unanimity of views on all global and regional issues” between Pakistan and China. Some Chinese have gone so far as to speak of Pakistan as “China’s Israel.” Clearly, a pinch of salt is needed here. Nevertheless, the fact of complementarity is plain to see.

Beijing and Islamabad, both faced with existing or imminent colossal dependence on Gulf energy supplies, have an obvious common interest both in sustaining friendly relations with the oil and gas supplier states in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia in particular, but also in guarding routes of transit to those supplies through the Indian Ocean. Both also have a common interest in developing—and ensuring access to—the energy resources of the Central Asian Energy Corridor. This means they share an interest in building friendly ties with the now independent Muslim-majority Central Asian republics and, by the same token, in preventing their rivals’ ties with these republics from getting too close. In the joint Sino-Pakistan development currently underway of new port facilities at Gwadar, as also in the earlier jointly engineered and constructed trans-mountain Karakoram Highway in northern Pakistan, these interests and a related general interest in the expansion of trade and commerce are served.

Far and away the most readily visible strategic complementarity, however, is their shared interest in the containment of India—or, as China-scholar John Garver puts it, in the prevention of “Indian hegemony” over the subcontinent. In Pakistan’s case, this interest has dominated all others from the moment independence was secured in 1947. It has helped inspire four wars with India and seems almost inseparable from the idea of Pakistan itself.

In China’s case, the actual extent of shared interest with Pakistan in the containment of India is less easily measured; indeed, Pakistanis have recently been displaying more than a little anxiety in regard to the seemingly robust growth in Sino-Indian relations—including even military-to-military relations.

Pakistanis take comfort in the arguments of those who contend that China’s rivalry with India is deep and lasting—hence, Pakistan’s importance to China will persist. As John Garver sees it, the alliance with Pakistan was always largely intra-regional in focus, prompted mainly by Beijing’s wish to prevent India’s emergence as a serious rival and, in particular, to block India from any role in China’s encirclement. At the forefront of their rivalry, Garver explains, “are Chinese efforts to establish and expand political and security relations with the countries of the South Asia-Indian Ocean region (SA-IOR) on the one hand, and Indian efforts to thwart the establishment of such links, on the other.” From the Indian perspective, China’s “aggressive” stance in the SA-IOR, according to Garver, covers a broad swath of activities, to include not only continuing nuclear, missile, and conventional arms assistance to Pakistan, but also the development of a military *cum* intelligence relationship with Nepal; increasingly dense military relations with Myanmar; mounting People’s Liberation Army activities in the

Indian Ocean; burgeoning military relations with Bangladesh; and efforts to establish normal diplomatic relations with Bhutan.

From the Chinese perspective, these activities, according to Garver, are fully warranted by two more or less permanent Chinese security vulnerabilities to which India is already or could become a substantial contributor. One is the stability of China's control over Tibet; the second is the safety of China's sea lines of communication across the Indian Ocean. India's close cooperation with the CIA's efforts to penetrate Communist-held Tibet in the 1950s, documented in a recent study, underscores for Beijing the inherently perishable character of New Delhi's present hands-off policy toward Tibet. By the same token, India's mid-2001 decision to create a Far Eastern Strategic Command at Port Blair for the Andaman and Nicobar island archipelagos, significantly enhancing India's capacity to monitor and potentially to threaten key chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, had to be looked upon apprehensively by Beijing, which was busily expanding its own military activities on islands off the coast of Myanmar. Compounding Chinese suspicions was India's "Look East Policy," launched in 1995 under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, a mix of economic and military rationales aimed at expanding India's security ties with states neighboring China in the Pacific Ocean. Alarming to Beijing, in particular, were New Delhi's efforts to deepen security dialogue and cooperation with Vietnam and Japan, both of which have long historical records of bitter enmity with China. As the Chinese saw it, the "Look East Policy" more than anything had the earmarks of a counter-encirclement policy aimed against China. Fundamental to China's security, viewed in the light of the foregoing, has long been the restraint of India—an objective that translates, in general terms, into a broadly based power-balancing strategy in the SA-IOR, and, of direct pertinence to the present discussion, into China's desire for both "a strong Pakistan, and a solid strategic partnership between China and Pakistan."

Pakistanis have to consider the more troubling possibility, however, that economic pragmatism, awakened by the opportunity for joint pursuit by India and China of economic modernization, may increasingly drive China's policies in South Asia. In his most recent book, the respected Indian journalist C. Raja Mohan, for instance, disputes Garver's view, arguing not only that the rapid expansion of economic relations between India and China is likely to play an increasingly larger role, driving them inexorably toward increasingly cooperative interaction, but that "a confident India could in fact leverage China's growing economic presence to achieve its own objective of regional integration in South Asia." It is true that two-way bilateral trade between Pakistan and China nearly doubled in value between 1996 and 2002; but in 2002, after almost forty years of Pakistan's "special relationship" with China, the trade was still valued unimpressively at less than \$2 billion—a figure even less impressive when set against the more than \$7 billion trade volume recorded in the same year between China and India.

In fact, virtually all analysts of China's strategic relationships with the states of South Asia, including Garver, acknowledge not only the powerful economic and other incentives for building a closer and more cooperative relationship between the world's two most populous states, but also the existence of "strains"

in China's alliance with Pakistan. Common to most of these analysts, nevertheless, is the belief that the pattern most likely to prevail in the relationship between China and India is one of continuing—even if somewhat muted—conflict. The reasons given for this likely persistence of Sino-Indian rivalry vary. The factor most often cited, however, is the strong and interdependent relationship that exists between the Sino-Indian and the Indo-Pakistani rivalries. The Indians' inevitable anxiety about China and the nightmare of Sino-Pakistani collusion, on the one hand, and China's huge incentive to take advantage of India's implacable rivalry with Pakistan, on the other, are powerful security strategy drivers. They go far to explain the Pakistanis' confidence that, all things considered, their China connection is most likely to endure.

### **PAKISTAN'S CHINA CONNECTION: LOOK EAST OR WEST?**

**W**hen it comes to China, Pakistan can boast only one substantial stakeholder—one “vested interest,” so to speak, or committed lobby—prepared to act as a forceful advocate of the China connection. That stakeholder is, of course, the Pakistan armed forces. For forty years, they (and their civilian allies in the country’s sprawling and diverse defense community) have been the principal beneficiaries of material Chinese assistance; they have also been the principal beneficiaries of its strategic weight. Any major change in Pakistan’s China policies would impact most directly and profoundly upon Pakistan’s armed forces. In the intimacy, depth, value, and duration of linkages with China, no other element of Pakistani society comes even close to the military. Pakistan’s trading class is oriented overwhelmingly toward Europe, the United States, and Japan. There is no Chinese diaspora in Pakistan of any size to exert influence on behalf of Beijing. Neither is there any indigenous ethnic or religious group in Pakistan with significant historical or cultural ties with China. Pakistan’s educated elites, its literati, are grounded overwhelmingly in the English tradition and habitually look to the West for intellectual nourishment. Neither Marxism nor Maoism has ever had a sizeable following in Pakistan. While Pakistan’s increasingly powerful Islamist political groups—such as the six-party Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) or United Action Forum that successfully contested the October 2002 national and provincial elections—obviously have strong political grounds for favoring China over either India or the United States, their religious orientation clearly is an impediment to unqualified endorsement of China, which has its own repressive anti-Islamist (“counter-terrorist”) campaign underway in Xinjiang.

Already hinted at in the foregoing is that there are at least as many—and most likely far more—Pakistani stakeholders with strong interest in Pakistan’s *American* connection as there are those prepared to stand up for China. This statement would hold up just as well among Pakistan’s *military* classes as it would in the country’s commercial and intellectual sectors. This is true in spite of the tremendous wave of anti-Americanism that has been showing up with regularity in opinion polls in Pakistan. The problem is that Pakistan’s cultivation of its American connection faces two fundamental obstacles. The lesser of the two is that Islamabad’s Chinese ally is bound to scrutinize closely any measure aimed at

building a strengthened U.S.-Pakistan relationship—and to let it be known in Islamabad whenever a measure seems to conflict with China's interests. The second and much more formidable obstacle is that, notwithstanding Islamabad's post-9/11 counter-terrorist alliance with Washington, the durability of Pakistan's relationship with the United States is far from assured. Pakistan's reputation in the American media *since 9/11* seems worse than it was *before*. And, if the recommendations of a Council on Foreign Relations/Asia Society report (*New Priorities in South Asia: U.S. Policy Toward India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*) released in November 2003 are taken seriously by Bush administration officials, then a noticeable (and likely negative) change in Washington's policy toward Pakistan could not be long in coming. "Pakistan," said the report's authors in the Executive Summary,

*presents one of the most complex and difficult challenges facing U.S. diplomacy. Its political instability, entrenched Islamist extremism, economic and social weaknesses, and dangerous hostility with India have cast dark shadows over this nuclear-armed nation. Even though Pakistan offers valuable help in rooting out the remnants of al-Qaeda, it has failed to prevent the use of its territory by Islamist terrorists as a base for armed attacks on Kashmir and Afghanistan.*

Pakistan looks east (to China), in other words, not merely because there are powerful incentives to do so, but because there are at least equally powerful disincentives against looking west. Besides its general dissatisfaction with Pakistan, Washington has launched a major effort to bolster its ties with India, and that effort has all the symptoms of permanence. To Pakistanis, this is far more serious—and threatening—than the parallel efforts by Beijing to foster friendlier ties with New Delhi. Pakistanis expect little to come of efforts underway in late 2003 to foster Pakistan's reconciliation with India. On the contrary, they expect the India-Pakistan confrontation to go on indefinitely. In this environment, it is not surprising that Pakistanis—the great majority of them, anyway—continue to look east.

## **CONCLUSION: "THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY"**

**T**here is nothing especially odd about a strategic perspective grounded in enmity with one's neighbor. Throughout history, most wars have been fought between geographic neighbors. Pakistan has fought four with India; and India has fought one with China. So the fact that Pakistan's friendship with China is based on their joint enmity toward India ("the enemy of my enemy") is not an occasion for surprise.

Also not surprising is that Pakistan's China debate, though earnest in policy circles, is largely curtained off from public view. In spite of its life-and-death importance to Pakistanis, the China debate makes its way into print fairly infrequently and is not a major focus of public discussion. This is not because Pakistanis entertain no doubts about the future of their country's bond with

China. It is that Pakistan has no good alternatives and is thus reluctant to take unnecessary risks.

What is most noteworthy, perhaps, is that the strategic debate about Pakistan's American connection does receive a lot of public attention in Pakistan. The American connection has historically been the most volatile of Pakistan's foreign ties and is the one Pakistanis would most like to retain and bolster, if they could. However, it is the one they most expect to perish and whose eventual fate will have enormous impact on the direction taken in coming years by the Sino-Pakistan alliance. If India's ties with the United States mature in a manner understood in both Beijing and Islamabad as inimical to their long-range interests, then the Sino-Pakistan alliance may grow even stronger than it is now. And if China's relationship with the United States grows yet more strained—as some observers believe it is bound to—then that too might reinforce Pakistan's China connection. Obviously, circumstances do not permit definitive judgments on the evolving pattern of alliances and counter-alliances now taking shape in Asia. Neither do they rule out major changes in the pattern of Pakistan's China debate. Clearly, much depends on momentous decisions yet to be made not only in Islamabad and Beijing but also in Washington and less so in New Delhi.